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ABSTRACT

This study investigated results of a study that focused on the choice made by three anglophone Canadian graduates of a French immersion program in elementary and junior high school to take high school core courses in French. Specifically, the study examined the students' decisions regarding postsecondary education, career choices, language-related experiences since graduating from high school, recommendations for participants and educators in French immersion programs, and attitudes about their own children's participation in French immersion. The major result was that 4 years after completing high school, the respondents continued to regard their French immersion schooling experiences as successful and seminal in their development. None chose a career or postsecondary program requiring second language knowledge, none used French regularly, and all expressed a feeling of loss and a desire to seek out situations in which they could use French authentically. Other emerging themes included: pride in the immersion experience; a perception that they processed information and conceptualized ideas in ways that were different from their non-immersion counterparts; some embarrassment at not having used French since high school graduation except for travel within Canada or France; recommendation of immersion to others; and regret for not using French more outside school during immersion. Contains 12 references. (MSE)

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GRADUATES OF A FRENCH IMMERSION PROGRAM

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Context of the Study

Often referred to as the "immersion phenomenon," French immersion programming in Canada is an innovation in public schooling that has been one of the most studied programs in the educational field in Canada. Classrooms where students learn their second language "by use while learning something else and not be formal language instruction is an experiential approach which has had a revolutionary impact on second language learning and teaching" (Stern, 1984, p. 4). According to UCLA professor and researcher Stephen Krashen:

> Canadian immersion is not simply another successful language teaching program--it may be the most successful program ever recorded in the professional language-teaching literature. No program has been as thoroughly studied and documented, and no program, to my knowledge, has done as well. (Krashen, 1984, p. 61)

What started as a pilot project, an "experiment" in bilingual schooling (Lambert & Tucker, 1972) proposed by a small group of parents in the province of Quebec in 1965, has now become an integral part of every Canadian province's educational system. In 1991, it was estimated that over 288,000 elementary and secondary school students were enrolled in French Immersion Programs throughout Canada (Commissioner of Official Languages, 1992, p. 217). More recent studies and statistics have indicated a leveling off and a drop in participation in this program of choice, particularly at the secondary level (Commissioner of Official Languages, 1996, pp. 98-101). A study conducted in the Carleton Board of Education in the province of Ontario found that 50 to 75 percent of French immersion students there dropped out of immersion (but not out of their studies) during high school (cited in the Annual Report of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 1992, p. 217). Figures released in 1990 revealed that of the total number of students enrolled in French Immersion programs in 1988 in the Canadian province of Alberta, only six percent were registered at the senior high school level (Alberta Education, 1990). Suggested in these findings was that students in several Canadian provinces were not choosing to continue in French immersion programs from kindergarten through grade twelve.

With the aim of investigating the variables associated with attrition and retention, a national study involving over 350 school districts throughout Canada was undertaken in 1991 (Halsall, 1991). Chief researcher Nancy Halsall reported in the summary document, *Attrition/retention of students in French immersion with particular emphasis on secondary school* (1991), that at the secondary level student attrition was between 20 and 80 percent (p. 3). Findings from this national study supported the contentions that high school

students tended to drop out of this alternative bilingual program because (a) there was a lack of variety in course offering, (b) the work load was too heavy, (c) there were other more appealing alternatives in programming, (d) they could achieve higher grades if they studied in English, (e) there was insufficient opportunity to speak French inside and outside of the classroom setting, (f) they were satisfied with their level of proficiency in their second language and did not see the purpose in continuing (p. 46). Even though research has reported on the positive association "between bilingualism and both general intellectual skills and divergent thinking" (Cummins & Swain, 1986, p. 10), the widespread perception that students who undertake secondary school studies in their second language may be disadvantaged persists.

The issue of attrition and retention of students in senior high school French Immersion programs in Canada presents one of the greatest challenges in providing a comprehensive bilingual program, kindergarten through grade twelve (Halsall, 1991). With the aim of gaining a better understanding of the issue of attrition and retention, in recent years there have been several within the research community who have called for qualitative studies which investigate the perspectives of those with first hand experience of the French Immersion phenomenon (Tardif & Weber, 1989).

Purpose of the Study

This study is a follow-up to a research project undertaken in partial fulfillment of a Master of Education degree in Educational Administration at the University of Alberta (Foster, 1992). The purpose of the original study was to investigate why a group of Anglophone students who had selected to be involved in a French Immersion pilot program in elementary and junior high school made the choice to take the core courses of their high school credit program in French, their second language. The intent of the study was to add to the practical and theoretical understanding of French Immersion programs by investigating and reporting on the perspectives of the students who had first hand experience with the programs and who had made the choice to continue study in French, their second language, after junior high school. Because parents had helped make the initial choice for French Immersion and many were involved when these children had made the choice to continue in the program at high school, it was assumed that the perspective of the parents would help in understanding the students' choice. Questions that were central to the study were:

1. Why did these Anglophone parents and children initially choose this French Immersion pilot program?
2. What had been the "lived experience" of these French Immersion students now in senior high school?

3. Why had these students selected to take the core courses of their high school credit program in French, their second language?

I have made several presentations to educators and parents based on the findings of the original study and have written and presented two academic papers about the findings, one at the American Education Research Association's 1997 Annual Meeting in Chicago (Foster, 1997).

Three of the student respondents who participated in the original study and who have now completed and graduated from the high school French immersion program were involved in this follow-up study. The purpose of this second study was to investigate to what extent selected graduates of a high school French Immersion program perceived that their bilingual schooling had influenced their decisions regarding post-secondary education and career.

The general research question guiding this study was: How do selected graduates of a high school French Immersion program view the impact of their bilingual schooling experiences on post-secondary and career choices? Specific research questions were:

1. What decisions have these students made regarding post-secondary education?
2. What career choices have these students made?
3. What has been the "lived bilingual experiences" of these students since graduating from high school?

The discussion and interpretations of the experiences of selected students who completed French immersion study at the senior high school are offered as an addition to existing perspectives on the graduates of bilingual programs. As the study upon which this paper is based is on-going, the discussion and findings reported herein must be read within that context.

Theoretical Framework

For this study, an interpretivist research methodology was adopted following the processes outlined by Bogdan and Biklen (1992). The study followed an emergent design to allow for the greatest understanding of the subjective reality of the selected respondents who had been involved in the original study (Foster, 1992). Furthermore, it was assumed that an inductive inquiry of this nature which

> allows us to glimpse the universe of immersion as it is perceived by a few of those who have seen it first-hand and, more importantly, who have lived it, might allow for a more complete understanding and a richer insight into the immersion phenomenon. (Sloan, 1991, p. 38)

Methods

Data collection and preliminary analyses occurred over a five month period between September 1997 and January 1998, a time period which coincided with the participants' fourth anniversary of graduation from high school. The three students selected to participate in the study had all completed the French immersion high school program and had throughout their three years of high school taken their core courses in French. All were Anglophones for whom French was a second language. The three participants had been classmates throughout their three years of high school and had experienced varying degrees of success in their academic program. During their high school French Immersion program, the three students varied in their second language proficiency as well. Two of these students had graduated from high school and were involved in university study; the third had entered the work force directly after high school graduation but just this past year has returned to college with the goal of pursuing a university degree.

As the purpose of this study was to understand how participants perceived that their immersion schooling had influenced their choices regarding post-secondary education and career, interviews conducted with the three students provided the primary data source. Each participant was interviewed on two separate occasions over the five month period. The interviews were semi-structured and followed an emergent design to include questions which were relevant to the different individual experiences. The first interview guide included the following questions:

1. Since graduating when have you had occasion to use your second language, French?
2. Do you currently have occasion to use French? Where? When?
3. In retrospect, what do you think were some of the advantages of taking your schooling in French?
4. In retrospect, what do you think were some of the disadvantages of taking your schooling in French?
5. What advice or recommendations would you give teachers, parents, or other students who are involved with French immersion schooling?
6. If and when you have children, will you consider French immersion schooling for them?

The transcribed interviews were submitted to a member check (Guba & Lincoln, 1985, p. 314) before being analyzed. Relevant documents pertaining to the history of this French Immersion pilot program (St. Albert Protestant Board of Education, 1989) and the academic history of the group of students who had been involved in the program were analyzed. The data from the documents and interviews were subjected to content analysis using conventional hermeneutic techniques (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). An audit trail (Guba

& Lincoln, 1985) was maintained throughout the data collection and the preliminary analysis stages of this study. An on-going discussion with university educators knowledgeable of the French Immersion phenomenon has been maintained throughout the conduct of this study in order to enhance trustworthiness and confirmability of the findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Findings

In the original study (Foster, 1992), students and parents outlined the intellectual, academic, personal, and social benefits derived from having participated in this French immersion pilot program. Special emphasis and importance were attributed to the students' proficiency in understanding and speaking their second language. The sense of commitment observed in these students who had chosen to study their core courses in French for high school credit appeared to have developed out of their positive experiences. These students were second language learners who, in spite of their varying levels of proficiency and academic achievement, "felt successful." They were proud of their involvement in this pilot program; they valued bilingualism and placed importance on the learning experience which they had shared over time with classmates within this pilot group. As well, student respondents valued the on-going support but non-interference of parents who were unilingual Anglophones. A descriptive profile of the "successful" bilingual student was constructed based on the findings of this original study and presented at the American Education Research Association Annual Meeting in Chicago (Foster, 1997).

The major theme that has emerged to date in the on-going follow-up study is that four years after completing high school, respondents continue to regard their experiences in French immersion schooling as successful and seminal in their development. When asked to reflect upon their experiences, all three graduates cited the intellectual, academic, personal, and social benefits derived from their participation in the French immersion program. Although all chose to speak of the positive aspects of this lived bilingual experience, none had chosen a career or post-secondary school program which required knowledge of their second language. None of the respondents currently "used" their French on a regular or required basis. After four years of no longer speaking and using French on a daily basis, all three respondents expressed a feeling of "loss" and a desire to seek out situations (i.e., academic courses, travel) where they would have occasion to use their second language in some authentic way.

Other themes which have emerged from the analysis conducted thus far include:
1. The sense of pride experienced by each respondent, fueled by having completed this pilot program, by having "been first," and by having established a tradition for others who

have since followed. Two of the respondents have had younger siblings who have chosen French immersion study at high school.

2. The perception that even when studying in their first language, information was processed and ideas conceptualized in ways that are "not the same" as their unilingual Anglophone counterparts. Among all three respondents, there was the perception that those who have studied in two languages "think differently." One student referred to the "culture" of French immersion students who have a particular and "enlarged way of looking at the world."

3. Each respondent felt some embarrassment at not having "used" their second language since high school graduation other than during travel to Quebec and France. None of the three believed that their French immersion study had affected their choices for post-secondary study or career, but each expressed a desire to pursue the study of French formally or informally. Each felt a "loss" from not having used their second language on a regular basis since graduation from high school.

4. Each respondent would recommend French immersion study to parents, but emphasized the importance of students making the "choice" to continue or not continue in the program at high school. Each would consider French immersion for their own children when it came time for selection of schools and programs.

5. When reflecting upon their school experience, each respondent expressed some regret at not having made more effort during their involvement in French immersion to "use" their second language to express feelings and opinions in social as well as formal classroom situations. All three students recommended that teachers and administrators of French immersion programs should continue to seek out ways to motivate second language students to use their second language in learning situations that promote the attainment of affective as well as cognitive goals.

Conclusions

As this follow-up study is on-going, preliminary findings only have been established from the data gathering and analysis. Findings thus far, although not conclusive, suggest that these three graduates of a French immersion program view the experience as integrative and cultural, but not necessarily instrumental in furthering career or academic goals. When completed, the findings and conclusions from this study will be presented at educational conferences and submitted for inclusion in Canadian educational journals with the aim of contributing to the practical and theoretical understanding of bilingual education and informing educators and policy makers who are committed to providing a comprehensive bilingual program, kindergarten through grade twelve (Halsall, 1991).

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